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ABSTRACT

Universities in the United States are employing increasing numbers of instructors for whom English is not the first language. Some have difficulty in communicating with their students and colleagues. Michigan Technological University began a program of classroom and tutorial instruction by trained teachers of English as a second language to help those nonnative instructors improve their English communication skills. Sessions were videotaped to monitor student progress and evaluate the exercises used to stimulate conversation. Participation and discussion of individual concerns were actively encouraged, with minimal interruption of classroom conversations and presentations. Correction of minor pronunciation and grammar problems was done when the students viewed the tapes. Activities were designed to increase communication skills in both general and technical areas, and all were preceded by discussion of relevant vocabulary. Exercises included interviews and introductions of and by the students in the first and last class sessions, descriptions of the student's homeland, role playing, technical talks, assignments to read and discuss informal English passages, pronunciation drills, and interpretation of realia. Students received weekly evaluations of their problems and progress. Participants significantly improved their communication skills and expressed interest in more frequent classes. (MSE)

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IMPROVING THE CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH OF FOREIGN INSTRUCTORS IN A TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Universities in the United States are employing increasing numbers of faculty for whom English is a second language. Many of these non-native speaking (NNS) teachers are fluent in English and, in fact, speak it with grace and with a knowledge of grammar to be envied by those of us who are native speakers. Others, however, have difficulty communicating with their students and colleagues.

Although students in all university departments have trouble understanding some of their NNS instructors, it is especially difficult for beginning students in science and engineering fields to understand technical information presented by a such teachers. These students are faced not only with learning to read and think about subjects with which they are unfamiliar, but also with trying to decipher strange vocabulary pronounced, and often written on the chalkboard, in a way that is incomprehensible to them.

In this paper I will describe two methods used at Michigan Technological University to help NNS instructors improve their English conversational skills.

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THE PROBLEM

The trend toward increasing employment of NNS faculty, especially in technological fields, has been noted by many authors dealing with engineering education and with teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL). Stephen Kahne writes in Engineering Education (1) "...but these students [non-U.S.] hold the promise of staffing our colleges. If the trend continues, American engineers will be educated by foreigners." Franck and DeSousa (2) note that at the University of California at Davis, most of the foreign teaching assistants are in science departments, especially chemistry and engineering.

Kathleen Bailey at the Monterey Institute of International Studies reports that teachers of ESL "...are being called upon, apparently in increasing numbers, to help science faculties and university administrators to deal with this unhappy situation" (faculty members who speak "somewhat broken and accented English").(3)

At Michigan Tech, students in first-year composition courses were asked to write short essays on their most positive and most negative impressions of college life (4). One of the five most-mentioned negative factors was "foreign instructors". This complaint outnumbered such common concerns as "overcrowded dorms", "lack of computer facilities", and even "weather/snow" in a community which receives almost 300 inches of snow each nearly-six-month-long winter. The student newspaper, The Michigan Tech Lode, alluded to the problem in the following John Auchter cartoon (5):

Everyday People **by John Auchter**

AN SO, DEE BEAR-EE-ABLE "X" EEZ PO-POR-TION-UL TO DEE DAR-REEV-A...
YO! P'FESSOR! I KNOW YER A FOREIGNER AN' ALL BUT WHA' DA HELL YOU TALKIN' 'BOUT?!
AHH... SCUZE ME. I DO NOT COM-REE-HUND WHAT YOU...
HUH? GEEZ! GOTT TALKIN' WIT' DAT DAWN ACCENT! CANT YOU TALK NO GOOD?!
YOU WEELL HAVE TO GOH-NUH-CIATE! ...I CANNOT...CAN-NOT GOH-DER-STAND I WANT YOU TO...
MAN! I DON'T BELIEVE THIS! ALLS I'M SAYIN' I MEAN...
WOULD YOU PLEASE SPEAK ENGLISH?!

SOLUTIONS

Several programs to increase the English communication skills of NNS teachers and other professionals have been described in publications dealing with higher education. Among the institutions sponsoring such programs are the University of California at Davis (2), The University of Pittsburgh (6), Monterey Institute of International Studies (3), the University of Michigan at Dearborn (7), and the University of California, Los Angeles (8).

Undoubtedly, many of the Universities mentioned above have foreign-language or ESL departments associated with their liberal arts colleges and are thus able to utilize faculty members trained in ESL techniques. For example, Cake and Menasche (6) describe the support given to the program at the University of Pittsburgh by the English Language Institute and the Department of General Linguistics. However, smaller colleges and technical institutions are not likely to have such departments available to organize, administer, and provide faculty to teach ESL classes, and as mentioned above, technical institutions are the very ones which are most likely to have large numbers of foreign-born

faculty and to be in the most dire need of such classes.

During the past several years at MTU, I developed two methods--classes and individual tutoring sessions--to help improve the conversational English skills of our NNS instructors without the assistance of a trained ESL staff. The instruction was designed with the idea that practice is the most important component of any program to improve communication skills. Both the class format and the tutoring sessions could easily be adapted for use by other technically-oriented institutions with NNS staff.

BACKGROUND

I first saw a need for instruction for NNS faculty when my class in conversational English for NNS undergraduate students attracted a number of NNS instructors, professors, and visiting researchers. Most of these people were much older than the other students, had more formal instruction and practice in using English, and were more confident about speaking this foreign tongue. In addition, the more the older students participated in the class activities, the more intimidated the undergraduates became and the less they participated. As a result of this experience, and with the cooperation of Michigan Tech's Research and Humanities Departments, a separate class for the more advanced students was offered the next two terms. We announced that the class would be available to advanced NNS faculty and staff and would provide opportunities for practicing English communication skills. I taught the class for two terms

during 1983-84. During the next year, a colleague and I began conducting one-to-one tutoring sessions.

CLASS DESCRIPTION

There were usually approximately ten students attending the weekly, hour-long classes. They included citizens of Poland, Rumania, Mainland China, West Germany, Turkey, Viet Nam, India, and Japan. Five were graduate assistants, three were professors, two were research assistants, and one was an undergraduate. All of these students were extremely highly motivated to improve their communication skills.

The classes were held in a television classroom equipped with three color television cameras, microphones, a control panel, and television monitors set up so that both speaker and audience could view the proceedings either "live" or on a monitor. The video equipment for the class was operated by an employee of the Instructional Resources Department.

Class sessions were videotaped so that students and instructor could monitor students' progress and so that the various exercises used to stimulate conversation could be evaluated. Since previous experience had shown that video tapes provided a valuable tool for self-evaluation by the undergraduate students, I felt that they would be even more useful to mature students who usually are more confident and less intimidated by seeing themselves on television.

At the beginning of each session, students were given an opportunity to ask questions which other students were encouraged

to answer and discuss. Next, I reviewed vocabulary from the previous session and explained the exercise for the current class. After each class I viewed the video-tapes and prepared an evaluation sheet which will be described later. The tapes were stored in a viewing room containing video cassette players and television monitors. Students were able to reserve the viewing room in advance so that they could also view the tapes.

During the first part of the term, I used exercises designed to make the students as comfortable as possible and to stimulate conversation between two or more students. About half-way through the term, students were asked to present information in a lecture format. (Exercises are described in detail in a section below.) The students were not interrupted during their conversations or presentations unless they could not be understood by the instructor or the others in the class. Minor pronunciation and grammar problems which did not interfere with understanding were left to be corrected when the video tape of the session was evaluated. The students were thus able to get as much practice in a normal conversational setting possible.

TUTORING SESSIONS

The tutoring sessions were held in the Reading/Writing Center where professional tutors offer help in developing communication skills. Like the classes, these weekly, one-hour sessions were video-taped, but the equipment (black and white camera, video cassette recorder, and monitor) was less elaborate and was operated by the tutors. The camera was set in a stable position,

focusing closely on the student so that facial expressions could be seen easily.

At the beginning of each session the tutor invited the student to ask questions. We felt that this was an important aspect of the tutoring sessions which allowed us to tailor them to individual needs. The students often had interesting topics to discuss, and, if they wished, the whole session would be taken up with this discussion.

If the student had nothing special to discuss, the regularly-planned exercise was used. We spent the first half of the hour on an exercise similar to those used in the classes, and the tutor would interrupt the student only if she could not understand what the student was saying. As in the classes, interruptions to correct pronunciation, grammar, and usage were avoided so that the conversation could flow as normally as possible. During the second half of the session, we viewed the video tape of the session, stopping it when errors occurred, and running it back over and over to analyze what the error was and why it was made. Often the students were more zealous in picking out errors than were the tutors. After we had discussed the specific problems, the tutor made out an evaluation sheet like the ones used in the classes for the student to take home and study before the next session. We tried to limit study items to important problems which interfered most acutely with comprehension. Minor problems like mispronouncing an "r" or an "l" were considered only if there were no major problems such as using the wrong verb tense or using the improper gender word ("My wife...he is a teacher.") Some students, however, were very

anxious to correct every problem, and they usually were very good at improving even these errors.

EXERCISES

Class activities were designed to increase communication skills in both general and technical areas. All exercises were preceded by a discussion of any vocabulary that might be needed to discuss the topic at hand, and during the activities students were encouraged to ask each other questions about words they did not understand. A list of new vocabulary was kept by the instructor, put on the chalkboard at the end of each class, and reviewed at the start of each succeeding class.
Some of the activities are described below.

Initial Interviews and Introductions: The class members and instructor were given name tags on which all were asked to put whatever name (including given name, surname, or Americanized version of either) they preferred to be called during the class. Everyone was encouraged to try to learn all others' names as soon as possible.

The students (and instructor if necessary) were then paired and asked to interview each other so that they would be able to introduce their partners to the rest of the class. However, before the interviewing started, a discussion was held about what kinds of information would be the most interesting and how to ask the questions to elicit that information. Students were also provided with "Interview Questionnaires" on which to record the information. They included such categories as "Name", "Native

Country", "Academic Department", "Hobbies", etc., as well as blank spaces for questions which had come up in discussion or had occurred to interviewers during the sessions.

After about ten minutes of interviewing per person, each pair of students was asked to come to the front of the room to introduce each other to the class. When the introductions were completed, members of the class were encouraged to ask each other questions as long as time permitted.

Final Interviews and Introductions: The same activities described above were repeated during the last class period of the term. However, instead of giving the true answers to the questions, students were asked to imagine that they had been transported by a time-machine fifteen or twenty years into the future and that their "wildest dreams" had come true. They were asked to answer the questions as the person that they would like to become. The students needed a lot of encouragement to dare to imagine a truly magnificent future, but when they finally understood the game they entered into it with enthusiasm. Many students, for example, saw themselves as Nobel Prize winners, or leaders of universities, corporations, or countries. They usually dreamed for success for their families as well. This exercise was much enjoyed by the students and elicited extensive, excited, and unguarded conversation.

In addition to the practice in conversational skills that the initial and final interview/introduction exercises provided, they also gave students an opportunity to practice the social skill of introducing strangers. Another important benefit of these sessions, was the opportunity it gave students and

instructor alike to compare videotapes of initial and final interviews and to evaluate progress made by the students.

Description of Homeland: This exercise was easy for the students because they had all had extensive experience describing their homelands since coming to this country. They felt quite comfortable with the assignment and their talks were interesting to their audience, so it was a good one to use for the second class in the term. Before we began the lesson, we discussed what kinds of things people would like to know and listed them on the chalkboard for easy reference. Because having something to look at other than an audience makes people more comfortable, a map for each student's country was also made available for them to refer to if they wished.

Role Playing: In this exercise each student was provided with a description of a role to play and an imaginary situation involving another character. The other character was played by another student in the class (or instructor if necessary). The situations were designed to simulate real-life situations the students might encounter. For example, one role involved a hard-nosed professor who refused to allow students to make up exams, no matter how good their excuses. The professor was to be confronted by a student who had missed an exam because the neighbor's house was burning down and the student was trying to save the family and their possessions. Another situation presented a person who had bought a used car which broke down immediately after the purchase. The disgruntled buyer then tried to return the "lemon" to a fly-by-night used car dealer who tried every way possible to get out of returning the money.

Although role playing was initially perceived to be a difficult and embarrassing task and received with groans and moans of displeasure from the students, this exercise turned out to be an enjoyable experiences for most of the class. And after the videotapes were reviewed, it was agreed that although it was difficult to play some of the roles, the activity helped students to learn to express themselves in emotionally-charged situations.

Technical Talks: Students were asked to prepare a talk about their field of study or research and present it to the class. They were also encouraged to use the chalkboard to illustrate concepts, just as they would in a regular classroom. During each talk other members of the class asked questions about vocabulary, concepts, diagrams, etc.

The sessions with technical talks were especially useful to the students because they were able to practice using the technical vocabulary that they use in the classroom or the laboratory. They appreciated the feedback from an audience that was friendly but critical and which did not let them get away with inadequate communication. The videotapes from these sessions were especially valued by the students.

Understanding Informal English: For these sessions, short interviews from Studs Terkel's book, Working (9) were assigned. Students were asked to read the material and prepare a talk about the particular person who was the subject of the interview. Students were also asked to make a list of all unfamiliar words, including slang and idioms, find out what they meant (preferably by asking a native speaker), and define them for the rest of the class.

Terkel's book is an excellent source for informal speech because of the completely naturalistic style he uses. The interviews also impart a great deal of interesting information about many different kinds of American occupations and how different American workers feel about their jobs.

The students appreciated this exercise especially because they were very eager to learn slang and idiomatic speech.

Pronunciation drills: Students who had severe pronunciation problems with individual and combinations of letters, stress, intonation, word endings etc. were encouraged to use Trager and Henderson's program, "Pronunciation Drills for Learners of English" (10) which consists of a manual and a series of audio tapes to provide drill in these problem areas.

Other exercises: Other exercises included watching and discussing video tapes of television ads and programs, interpreting illustrations taken out of popular magazines like "Psychology Today", and describing objects pictured in a mail-order catalogue.

The tutoring session activities were similar to those described for the classes except that rather than a class, the tutor was the audience and conversational partner.

EVALUATION SHEETS

After careful examination of the video tapes of each class or tutoring session, an evaluation sheet was prepared for each student. The sheets listed some of the most significant and prevalent errors which would interfere with effective

communication. While this method would undoubtedly be considered too harsh to be used with undergraduates, the older, more experienced students rated the weekly evaluations sheets to be one of the most helpful aspects of the sessions. Moreover, the students carefully studied the evaluation sheets, asked questions about the theory behind the correct usage, and conscientiously practiced the correct forms.

A sample evaluations sheet follows:

# # # # # # # # # # # #

VIDEO TAPE EVALUATION 5-3-84

YOU SAID...	YOU SHOULD SAY
She is an airline reservationist for 12 years before she is...	She was an airline reservationist before she became...
First of all she didn'ts work with compu er.	At first she didn't work with computers.
It has every information...	It has a lot of information
She cannot late for her	She cannot be late for her job.
If she's late for a minute...	If she's a minute late...
The compu er can fide it...	The computer will record it...
reservation for...	reservations for...
She's working in airplane company.	She works for an airline company.

HOMEWORK

Work on -short "e" sound; -"th" sound; -long "a" sound; -using past tense

# # # # # # # # # # # #

CONCLUSION

Communication skills of the participants (as measured subjectively by viewing video-tapes of the first and last sessions) improved noticeably over the two terms, even though the class and tutoring sessions were held only once a week.

In addition, course evaluation sheets completed by students at the end of each term indicated they believed both the classes and the tutoring sessions helped to improve their conversational English skills. However, both instructors and students concluded that more frequent sessions were needed; in answer to the question "What other ideas can you suggest for improving the class?", nearly every student suggested that both the classes and the tutoring sessions be held more often. Their observations indicated that the basic premise of the program--that what is needed to improve communication skills is practice, practice, and more practice--was a valid one.

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